

# An Untitled Lecture on Plato's *Euthyphron*

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The subject matter of the *Euthyphron* is piety. For more than one reason the *Euthyphron* does not tell us what Plato thought about piety. It certainly does not transmit to us Plato's final or complete view of piety. Still the work transmits to us an important part of Plato's analysis of piety. Thus, by studying the *Euthyphron* we shall not learn more than part of the truth, as Plato saw it, a partial truth, which is necessarily also a partial untruth. Yet we can be certain that we shall never find the truth about piety as Plato saw it except after having understood and digested the half-truth that is presented to us not so much in the *Euthyphron* as through the *Euthyphron*. The half-truth presented to us through the *Euthyphron* does not belong to the common<sup>1</sup> type of half-truth. The most common type of half-truth tells us the<sup>2</sup> commonly-accepted opinions. The half-truth presented through the *Euthyphron* is not a generally-accepted half-truth. It is unpopular. Since it is unpopular it is irritating. An irritating half-truth is in one respect superior to the popular half-truth. In order to arrive at the irritating half-truth we must make some effort. We must think. Now it is most unsatisfactory if we are first forced to think and then receive no other reward than an irritating provisional result. Plato gives us two kinds of comfort: first, thinking itself may be said to be the most satisfying<sup>3</sup> activity regardless of the character of the result. Secondly, if we should believe that the result is more important than the way to the result, Plato's moral character is the guarantee that the final result, or what he regarded as the complete account of piety, would be absolutely satisfactory and in no way irritating.

The *Euthyphron* is a conversation between Euthyphron and Socrates about piety. Three definitions of piety are suggested and all three of them prove to be insufficient. Having arrived at the end of the dialogue, we are perplexed with regard to piety. We do not know what piety is. But does not everyone know what piety is? Piety consists in worshipping the ancestral gods, but<sup>4</sup> according to ancestral custom.<sup>5</sup> This may be true, but piety is supposed to be a virtue. It is supposed to be good. But is it truly good? Is worshipping ancestral gods according to ancestral custom good? The *Euthyphron* does not give us an answer. It would be more accurate to say that the discussion presented in the *Euthyphron* does not give us an answer. But the discussion presented in any Platonic dialogue is only part of the dialogue. The discussion, the speech, the *logos*, is one part; the other part is the *ergon*, the deeds,<sup>6</sup> the action, what is happening in the dialogue, what the characters do or suffer in the dialogue. The *logos* may

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end in silence and the action may reveal what the speech conceals. The conversation between Socrates and Euthyphron takes place after Socrates has been accused of impiety. The dialogue abounds with references to this fact, this action. It forces us, therefore, to wonder, Was Socrates pious? Did Socrates worship the ancestral gods according to ancestral custom? The *Euthyphron* then gives us a two-fold presentation of piety. First, a discussion of what piety is. Secondly, a presentation of the problem of Socrates' piety. These two subjects seem to belong to two entirely different orders. The question of what piety is is philosophical. The question of whether Socrates was pious seems to belong to the realm of gossip, rather than to that of philosophy. Yet while this is true in a sense, it misses the decisive point. For the philosophic question is whether piety in the sense defined is a virtue. But the man who has all the virtues to the degree to which a human being is capable of having all the virtues is the philosopher. Therefore if the philosopher is pious, piety is a virtue. But Socrates is a representative of philosophy. Hence, if Socrates is pious, piety is a virtue. And if he is not pious, piety is not a virtue. Therefore, by answering the gossip question of whether Socrates was pious, we answer the philosophic question regarding the essence of piety. Then let us see whether we can learn anything from the *Euthyphron* regarding Socrates' piety.

Socrates is accused of impiety, he is suspect<sup>7</sup> of impiety. Now Euthyphron, who is a soothsayer, is an expert in piety, and he is convinced that Socrates is innocent. Euthyphron vouches for Socrates' piety. But Euthyphron does not know what piety is. Still if we assume that piety consists in worshipping the ancestral gods according to ancestral custom,<sup>5</sup> everyone could see whether Socrates was pious, whether Socrates did or did not worship the ancestral gods according to ancestral custom.<sup>5</sup> Euthyphron, in spite of his philosophic incompetence, could be a good witness as regards the decisive fact. But the truth is that Euthyphron is not likely to pay much attention to what human beings do. Above all, Euthyphron's own piety is, to say the least, open to suspicion. Therefore, let us dismiss Euthyphron's testimony and see what we ourselves can observe.

We hear from Socrates' own mouth that, both prior to his accusation and after it, he regarded it as important to know the divine things. Apparently in consequence of his quest for knowledge about the divine things, the accuser thought that Socrates was an innovator, that is to say, a producer of error. The accuser naturally thought that he himself knew the truth. He charged Socrates in fact with ignorance of the truth about the divine things. The charge presupposed that Socrates' alleged or real ignorance was careless,<sup>8</sup> but that ignorance could not be criminal except if truth about the divine things was easily accessible to every Athenian citizen. This would indeed be the case if the truth about the divine things were handed down to everyone by ancestral custom. Was Socrates criminally ignorant of the divine things? He seems to grant that he is ignorant of the divine things. But he seems to excuse his ignorance by the

difficulty of the subject matter. His ignorance is involuntary, and therefore not criminal. Now if Socrates was ignorant of the divine things, he did not believe in what tradition or ancestral custom told him, as well as everyone else, about the divine things. He did not regard these tales as knowledge. As a matter of fact, he suggests that one ought not to assent to any assertion of any consequence before having examined it. He makes it rather clear that the ancestral reports about the ancestral gods are not more than bare assertions. If Socrates was really ignorant, radically ignorant,<sup>9</sup> he does not even know whether the ancestral gods exist. How then could he worship the ancestral gods according to ancestral custom?<sup>5</sup> If Socrates was really ignorant, and knew that he was really ignorant, he could not possibly be pious. Of course, he could still go through the motions of worship, he could outwardly conform. But this conformity would no longer be pious, for how can a sensible man worship beings whose very existence is doubtful? Socrates' outward conformity would not have been due to any fear of the gods but only to being ashamed of what human beings might think of non-conformance, or to the fear of bad reputation. Fear of bad reputation is fear of reputation for badness. People who did not believe in the ancestral gods were thought to be simply bad men, men capable of every kind of wickedness, and this stigma attached especially to philosophers. In the circumstances, Socrates would seem to have been forced to conform outwardly, if not for his own sake, at any rate for the sake of philosophy. Still, if Socrates conformed outwardly, how could people know that he was not pious? They could know it from what he said. But did Socrates say everything he thought to every human being? He himself feared that he was believed to say profusely<sup>10</sup> everything he knew to every real man out of philanthropy, and to say it not only without receiving pay, but even gladly paying money himself,<sup>11</sup> if he had any, provided people would only listen to him. We have<sup>12</sup> the impression that what the Athenians really resented was not so much his cleverness, or the deviationist character of his thought, as his alleged missionary<sup>13</sup> zeal. His real crime, the crime that killed him, was then not so much his impiety as his apparent philanthropy, or what is called in the charge, his corrupting the young.

Hitherto, we have taken at its face value what Socrates said in regard to his ignorance with regard to the divine things. But if we look again into the *Euthyphron*, we find that Socrates is in fact not altogether ignorant in this respect. Towards the end of the conversation, he says that all good things which he has<sup>14</sup> have been given by the gods. Earlier in the conversation he indicates that he loathes the current stories about the gods committing unjust actions or their having dissensions and fights with each other, and that he does not believe that these<sup>15</sup> tales are true. He seems to believe to know that the gods are good and just<sup>16</sup> and, therefore, both the givers of all good things and only of good things to man and incapable of fighting with each other. But precisely this knowledge would make him impious, for the current tales about the gods which he rejected

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were not merely the invention of good painters and not so good poets.<sup>17</sup> It is much more important that they supplied the rationale of important elements of the ancestral worship. The fact that he did not accept the current tales about the fights of the gods would explain why he was accused of impiety. He himself suggests this explanation. But did he profusely say<sup>18</sup> to every real man that these tales are untrue? Was he guilty of excessive philanthropy?

In his conversation with Euthyphron he does nothing of the kind. He does not go beyond indicating an unbelief in regard to these tales, or his being displeased with these tales. He says that he accepts the tales with some feeling of annoyance. In addition he did not seek the conversation with Euthyphron. He did not approach Euthyphron with the intention of enlightening him. On the contrary, the conversation is forced upon him by Euthyphron. Without Euthyphron's initiative, Euthyphron might never have heard that one could or should doubt the current tales about the gods. Socrates does not show a trace of missionary zeal.

To this, one might make the following objection. In the second book of the *Republic*, Socrates develops his theology<sup>19</sup> at great length. But, in the first place, the characters with whom Socrates talks in the *Republic* and even the audience which is present are a select group. Euthyphron does not belong to the same type of man. He belongs firstly<sup>20</sup> to the majority of Athenians who condemned Socrates to death. And, secondly, in the *Republic* Socrates does not explicitly mention, as he does in the parallel in the *Euthyphron*, the fact that the wrong notions of the gods were, as it were, embodied in the official cult of the city of Athens. The outspoken criticism of the *Republic* is directed against the poets who were private men and not against ancestral custom. I draw this provisional conclusion. Socrates was indeed impious in the sense of the charge. But he was not guilty of that excessive philanthropy of which he feared he might be thought to be guilty. I have said the conversation with Euthyphron was forced upon Socrates. Certainly Socrates did not seek that conversation. The reference to Socrates' favorite haunts at the beginning of the dialogue is most revealing. That reference reminds us of the opening of the *Charmides* and the *Lysis* where Socrates himself describes how gladly he sought those places where he could converse with the young. Socrates does not gladly talk to Euthyphron. He talks to him because he cannot help it, out of duty, or because he thought it was just to do so. This conversation was an act of justice. Socrates shows by deed that he is just. Here the deed bears out the implicit testimony of Euthyphron. Whereas Socrates' piety remains, to say the least,<sup>21</sup> doubtful, his justice becomes perfectly evident.<sup>22</sup> But what is justice? According to the *Euthyphron*, justice, in the strict sense, seems to be identical with skillfully tending human beings. By virtue of such skillful tending, herding, human beings are benefited or become better. Whatever may have been the success of Socrates' skillfully tending Euthyphron, he is certainly trying hard to make Euthyphron better by showing him, who believes to be extremely wise, that he is

extremely stupid. Or by trying to make him somewhat reasonable, in acting justly, by trying to make people better, Socrates believes to act prudently. For every<sup>23</sup> sane man would want to live among good and hence helpful persons, rather than among bad and hence harmful people. But just as a man who tries to appease vicious dogs might be bitten by them, or just as a father who takes away from a child harmful toys might provoke the child's anger, Socrates, in trying to better people, might have provoked their resentment, and thus have come to grief. Was it then prudent of him even to attempt to better the Athenians? In spite of this difficulty, Socrates' attempt was rewarding to him and to his friends, and ultimately even to us. For in talking to people, however silly, he was learning, he was studying human nature. Without this study the Platonic dialogues could never have been written.

But let us come back to the main issue, Socrates' impiety. Socrates was impious because he knew, or believed to know, that the ancestral reports about the ancestral gods which were underlying ancestral custom are wrong. This knowledge is perfectly compatible with the possibility that Socrates was ignorant in regard to the divine things. He may have had sufficient knowledge of the divine things to know that the current tales about the gods are untrue, and therefore that the worship of the ancestral gods according to ancestral custom<sup>5</sup> is not good or, if you wish, that to worship the ancestral gods according to ancestral custom is not true piety. But he may not have had sufficient knowledge of the divine things in order to know what true piety positively is. In that case, he could not know whether he was truly pious or not. And assuming that other men are not likely to be wiser than Socrates, no man could know whether Socrates was pious or not. In that case one could say no more than he ought not to have been punished for impiety. I personally believe that<sup>24</sup> this would have been a wise decision. It is just possible that this is the most obvious message of the *Euthyphron*: that it would be wonderful if the crime of impiety could be wiped off the statute books. But from Plato's point of view that message could not express more than a pious wish, a wish that cannot be fulfilled.

Let us now turn to a somewhat more exact analysis of the *Euthyphron*. Let us first try to establish the place of the *Euthyphron* within the cosmos of the Platonic dialogues. The *Euthyphron* deals with piety, i.e., with one particular virtue. It belongs therefore together with the *Laches* which deals with courage, the *Charmides* which deals with moderation, and with the *Republic* which deals with justice. Now there are four cardinal virtues—courage, moderation, justice, and wisdom. There is no Platonic dialogue devoted to wisdom, which, I add, is only true if you assume that the *Theages* is spurious, because the *Theages* is devoted to wisdom. Instead we have a Platonic dialogue on piety. Is then wisdom to be replaced by piety? The dialogue in which the four cardinal virtues are set forth most clearly is the *Republic*. In the *Republic* Socrates seems rather to replace piety by wisdom. When speaking of the nature of the philosopher, i.e., on the most exalted level of the discussion of morality in the

*Republic*, Socrates does not even mention piety. In spite or because of this, there is no Platonic dialogue devoted to wisdom. Yet wisdom is a kind of science, and there is a dialogue devoted to science, the *Theaetetus*. Now the *Euthyphron* and the *Theaetetus* belong together, not merely because they deal with particular virtues, but also because they are contemporaneous: the two conversations take place about the same time, after the accusation and before the condemnation. They belong to the end of Socrates' life. Accordingly, they contain explicit references by Socrates to his father and his mother or, more precisely, to the skill of his father and the skill of his mother or, still more precisely, to the skill of his ancestor on his father's side and to the skill of his mother. He compares his own skill to the skill of his mother. He denies that his own skill has any kinship with the skill of his ancestor on his father's side, with the skill of Daedalus. The relation of his own skill to the ancestral, to the paternal, remains doubtful. His attitude toward the ancestral or paternal remains doubtful.

The *Euthyphron* deals with piety and it leaves open the question of what piety is. The *Theaetetus* deals with science and it culminates therefore in a description of the philosophic life. That description in its turn culminates in the thesis that one must try to flee from here thither as quickly as possible, but that flight is assimilation to god as far as it is possible. And that assimilation consists in becoming just and pious together with prudence.<sup>25</sup> Here in this most solemn and central passage, almost literally central, the question of whether piety is a virtue is answered in the affirmative. Yet this passage is not altogether free from ambiguity as would appear from a consideration of the context. One cannot settle any Platonic question of any consequence by simply quoting Plato. This much about the place of the *Euthyphron* within the cosmos of the Platonic dialogues. Let us now turn to the setting.<sup>26</sup>

The aged Socrates is accused of impiety by young Meletus. Euthyphron takes Socrates' side over against Meletus. But Euthyphron, the young Euthyphron, has accused his own aged father of impiety. Euthyphron's action parallels Meletus'<sup>27</sup> action, the young man accusing the aged one. Euthyphron occupies a middle position between Socrates and Meletus. What kind of a man is he? What kind of man is he who is the only interlocutor in Plato's only dialogue dealing with piety? Euthyphron is well-disposed towards Socrates and he is a boaster. He is a harmless boaster. There is a connection between his boasting and his harmlessness. What makes him side with Socrates? Socrates has a power of divination, the demonic thing that happened to him. And Euthyphron is a professional diviner. Both Euthyphron and Socrates are different. Both have superior gifts. And superior gifts of the same kind. On account of this superiority they are envied by the many. Euthyphron believes that he and Socrates are in the same boat. Euthyphron is a diviner. He boasts that he has superior knowledge of divine things. Because he has such knowledge he can predict the future in an infallible manner. Yet the people will laugh at him as at

a madman. They do not take him seriously. They regard him as harmless. But he is so certain of his superiority that such ridicule does not affect him. He is proud to appear to be mad. For he knows somehow that the divine is bound to appear as madness to those who have at best only human wisdom. He speaks of himself and the gods in the same breath. He draws a line between himself and human beings. He is certain that only an expert in the divine things, a man like him, can be pious. By implication he denies the ordinary citizens the possibility of being pious. He has a great contempt for the many. He keeps the most marvelous part of his knowledge for himself, or for an elite. He conceals his wisdom. He does not conceal, however, his claim to wisdom. Therefore, he is sometimes driven to reveal his wisdom too. One does not know whether he conceals his wisdom voluntarily or because it does not find any takers. Being versed in the divine things, he despises the human things; hence he knows next to nothing of human things. He seems to believe that all conflicts are conflicts about principles, about values. He doesn't seem to be aware that most conflicts presuppose agreement as to principles, that most conflicts arise from the fact that different men regard the same thing as good, and want to have it each for himself. He seems to believe that men who are accused of a crime defend themselves by denying the principle that criminals ought to be punished instead of denying the fact that they committed the crime.<sup>28</sup> Euthyphron is harmless, within the limits of his knowledge of divine things. If this knowledge should force him to harm human beings, he will not for a moment hesitate to do so. He would not hesitate for a moment to accuse them of impiety even if they are his father or mother, his brother or sister, his children, his wife or his friends. In striking contrast to Socrates who would not accuse anyone of anything. At the beginning of the conversation, Euthyphron believes that he is in the same boat as Socrates. Socrates draws his attention to the fact that whereas Euthyphron is ridiculed on account of his superior gift, Socrates is persecuted on account of his. Socrates suggests, as an explanation of this difference, that Euthyphron conceals his wisdom and therefore is safe, whereas Socrates is thought to broadcast his wisdom and therefore is in danger. At this point there does not seem to be another difference between Socrates and Euthyphron than that Euthyphron is more reticent than Socrates. After Euthyphron had proudly told the surprised Socrates of his feat which consists in accusing his own father of impiety, and Socrates has indicated a doubt in regard to the wisdom of this act, Euthyphron might seem to become aware that he is wiser than Socrates. Whereupon Socrates suggests that he wishes to become a pupil of Euthyphron, who claims to know everything about the divine things, in order thus to bring about his acquittal of the charge of impiety. He suggests more particularly that he would like to use Euthyphron as a lightning protector against Meletus' bolts. He wishes to hide behind Euthyphron's back and his well-concealed wisdom. He draws Euthyphron's attention to the fact that by teaching Socrates Euthyphron is going to leave the sheltered position which Euthyphron enjoyed hith-

erto. All this does not make any impression on Euthyphron. All this does not make him realize that he is not in the same boat as Socrates, or that a gulf separates him from Socrates. He becomes aware of this gulf only after Socrates has indicated his doubt of the truth of the current tales about the gods. For after this he puts, however unwittingly, Socrates into the same category as the many. From that point on he knows that Socrates is not in the same boat as he.<sup>29</sup> Yet he still apparently regards Socrates, in contradistinction to the many, as educable, i.e., as willing to listen to Euthyphron's wisdom. Socrates, however, disappoints his expectations. Very curiously, Socrates is chiefly interested in less worthy, less divine and, in fact, trivial subjects. He is much more interested in the definition of piety than in wondrous stories about what the gods did or what they demand of man. Socrates seems to have a desire for a kind of knowledge which Euthyphron does not regard very highly, which, however, he condescends to gratify. In the sequel it dawns upon Euthyphron that he might lose his lawsuit which, after all, he would have to win on earth before a human jury, before a jury consisting of the many; but Euthyphron pays too little attention to human things to be upset by that prospect. On the contrary, Socrates' strange familiarity with human things, and with the manner in which the low conduct their low affairs, has convinced Euthyphron that Socrates belongs with the many not only for the time being but altogether, that Socrates is not educable, that his unwillingness to listen to Euthyphron's wisdom is due to incapacity to understand that wisdom. Socrates, in a word, is a worldling. Somewhat later, Socrates succeeds in bringing it home to Euthyphron that he grossly contradicts himself. Although he knows that self-contradiction is a bad thing, and although he appeals to the principle of self-contradiction when arguing against others, Euthyphron is in no way perplexed by the weakness of his own speech. In fact, he would seem to have expected something like it. His self-contradiction merely proves to him that he cannot say or express to Socrates what he thinks, or has an awareness of. How indeed can one express experiences like those of which Euthyphron can boast to someone who has never tasted the divine things? Is one not bound to contradict oneself when trying to communicate the incommunicable? Still later, Euthyphron almost openly refuses to tell Socrates the true secrets regarding the divine things, although Socrates urges him to do so. He suggests that Socrates must rest satisfied with the simple verities which even the vulgar know sufficiently. Socrates' strange remark regarding these simple verities—they concern sacrifices and prayers—apparently reveals to Euthyphron an abyss of ignorance in Socrates. When Socrates asks Euthyphron shortly before the end of the conversation not to regard him as unworthy, he is quite serious to the extent that he is convinced that Euthyphron does regard him as unworthy. The conversation comes to an end because Euthyphron gives it up as hopeless, and he gives up the conversation as hopeless because he has learned in the course of the conversation that Socrates is a hopeless case. Euthyphron is immune to Socrates' conversational skill. He suffers as little change



during the conversation as Socrates himself. He learns in his own way something about Socrates, just as Socrates learns in his way something about Euthyphron. This is all.<sup>30</sup> In a sense, then, he is really in the same boat as Socrates. For the similarity<sup>31</sup> which we have mentioned amounts to a fundamental similarity. Euthyphron is a caricature of Socrates. Just as Socrates, Euthyphron transcends the dimension of the ordinary arts and virtues. But whereas Socrates goes over from the ordinary arts and virtues to philosophy, Euthyphron goes over from them to a spurious kind of knowledge of the divine things. Euthyphron, as it were, replaces philosophy by a spurious kind of knowledge of the divine things.<sup>32</sup> Although Euthyphron believes to be superior to both Meletus and Socrates, he in fact occupies a middle position, between Meletus and Socrates. We must now try to define that middle position.

Meletus accused Socrates of not believing in the gods in which the city believes.<sup>33</sup> Meletus identifies himself with the belief of the city. Meletus calls Socrates before the tribunal of the city. Meletus identifies himself with what we may call the orthodox view. What the orthodox position is will become somewhat clearer after we have clarified Euthyphron's deviation. Euthyphron himself knows<sup>34</sup> that he is different, that he deviates from what "the human beings" regard as pious. What does he understand by piety? In his first answer to Socrates' question as to what the pious is, he gives a formally defective answer. He gives an example instead of a definition. His second answer is formally adequate and so is his third and last answer. But neither the second nor the third answer expresses that view of piety which is underlying the formally defective first answer. Now only the first answer has a direct relation to Euthyphron's taste,<sup>35</sup> to his action, to his accusation of his father. Only the first answer is a speech of Euthyphron in harmony with Euthyphron's deed, with his life, with the principle animating<sup>36</sup> his life. It is therefore the only answer given by Euthyphron which throws a light on that view of piety which is characteristic of him. Plato has killed three birds by making Euthyphron express his true view<sup>37</sup> of piety in a formally defective answer. In the first place, he thus characterizes Euthyphron as insufficiently trained. Furthermore, he thus lets us see that Euthyphron never made fully clear to himself the full meaning of his deviation from the orthodox or accepted view. And thirdly, he thus prevented<sup>38</sup> a real discussion of the real issue: no solution to the problem of piety can be given in the circumstances, and no solution to the problem of piety shall be given lest the reader be prevented from seeking the solution for himself. What then would be a formally adequate expression of that view of piety which Euthyphron indicates in his first and formally defective answer? We shall say: piety consists in doing what the gods do. And we shall contrast this view with the orthodox view, according to which piety consists in doing what the gods tell us to do. For to worship the ancestral gods according to ancestral custom<sup>5</sup> means,<sup>39</sup> since the custom must ultimately be conceived of as divinely instituted, to do what the gods tell us to do. Euthyphron expresses his view of piety by deed, rather

than by speech. Contrary to ancestral custom, he accuses his father of impiety. Yet piety is said<sup>40</sup> to consist in worshipping the ancestral gods according to ancestral custom. His deed amounts to a denial<sup>41</sup> of the accepted view. His deed expresses a view that piety consists in doing what the gods do. Euthyphron's view of piety is heretical. Or, to use a more up-to-date term, it is deviationist.<sup>42</sup> This can be easily seen from the following considerations.<sup>43</sup> According to the orthodox view, piety consists chiefly, not to say exclusively, in praying and sacrificing. But the gods do not pray and sacrifice. By imitating the gods or the actions of the gods, by doing what the gods do, one will not pray or sacrifice. The gods are not pious. By imitating the gods, one ceases to be pious. A more adequate formulation of Euthyphron's view would therefore be that what pleases the gods is if men do what the gods do, and therefore that what pleases the gods is something entirely different from the pious. But Euthyphron shrinks from admitting to himself this implication of his view. In his second answer, he identifies the pious with what is pleasing to the gods. Yet Socrates shows him that what he really means is that the pious and what is pleasing to the gods are altogether different things. It is true Socrates shows this to Euthyphron in a somewhat different manner than I just indicated, but we shall gradually see that Socrates' explicit argument is only the apparently simplified but in fact the immensely telescoped formulation of his implicit argument. Euthyphron holds then the view that piety consists in doing what the gods do. How does he know what the gods do? From what the human beings believe about the gods, from what the human beings agree upon in regard to the gods, from the current tales about the gods which he takes to be true. But those current tales also say that men ought not to do what the gods do, but rather what the gods tell men to do. Euthyphron's position is therefore untenable. The authority to which he appeals refutes him. He ought to return to orthodoxy.

But can one return to orthodoxy? Can one accept a position which is based on mere tales? Yet, if we abandon the tales, what can we say about the gods and about piety? Still we divine that the gods are superhuman beings, and therefore that the highest human type gives us an inkling of what the gods might be. But the highest human type is the wise man. The analogy of the wise man will therefore be the best clue at our disposal in regard to the gods. Now the wise man loves more the people who do what he does than those people who merely do what he tells them to do, and who do not do what he does. Accordingly, we may then be inclined to think, considering that we understand by gods superhuman beings, that the gods do not rule at all by telling people what they should do, or by issuing commands. However this may be, the analogy of the wise man, which is our only guide to knowledge of the gods or of what would please the gods—this analogy leads us to realize that Euthyphron's view of piety is a half-hearted attempt to transcend the orthodox view of piety in the direction of a higher view. Euthyphron does occupy a middle position

between Meletus and Socrates. It is impossible to return to Meletus. We have no choice but to go forward to Socrates.<sup>44</sup>

The direction of the road and even the end of the road is indicated by Euthyphron's half-way position and by the difficulty with which it is beset. Yet Euthyphron's view is superior to the orthodox view and Euthyphron knows it. His boasting is not altogether unfounded. Euthyphron transcends the orthodox view because he aspired to something higher than is visualized by the many. Yet he has no right to this observation.<sup>45</sup> He really is a boaster. Euthyphron contradicts himself by saying that what pleases the gods is the pious, and by meaning that what pleases the gods is not the pious. To solve the contradiction, one must leave it at simply denying<sup>46</sup> the identity of what pleases the gods and the pious. One must have the courage of holding the view that one cannot please the gods except by being impious in the sense in which the city understands impiety. Or, more precisely, one must have the courage to be impious in a certain manner. In what manner? Euthyphron had meant that it is pleasing to the gods if men do what the gods do. But the different gods do different and even opposite things. By pleasing one god one will displease the other.<sup>47</sup> It is impossible to please the gods if the different gods are pleased by different things, if the different gods disagree with each other, if they fight with each other. Euthyphron admits this in a way. He is doing what the best and justest god, Zeus, does. He chooses the justest god out of the many gods for his model. But in order to make this choice, he must know justice. He must know what justice is. He must know the idea of justice. For the justest god is the god that imitates the idea of justice most perfectly. But if one knows the idea of justice, there is no reason why one must imitate<sup>48</sup> the most perfect imitation of the idea of justice. Why not imitate the idea of justice itself? There is no reason for imitating any god. Imitating the gods, doing what the gods do because the gods do it, and hence piety, proves to be superfluous. We must go a step further and say there is no need for any gods. If we doubt the current tales about the gods, if we try to think for ourselves, we are led to the conclusion that what general opinion assigns to the gods actually belongs to the ideas. The ideas replace the gods. From here we can understand and judge Meletus' charge.

Meletus is right to this extent. Socrates really does not believe in the gods of the city. And he really introduces different beings. But Meletus is wrong in assuming that the different beings which Socrates introduces are gods or demonic things. In fact they are the ideas. If we want to speak of gods, we would have to say that the different gods which Socrates introduced are the ideas. One can also say that<sup>49</sup> Meletus erred grossly in speaking of Socrates' introducing novel things. For the ideas, being prior to any beings which imitate the ideas, are prior to any gods. They are the first things, the oldest things. Following a clue given by Euthyphron, Socrates formulates Meletus' charge as fol-

lows: Socrates is accused of making gods (the Greek, *poiein*, “inventing”). Socrates’ defense can be stated as follows. Socrates is the only one who recognizes as first things such beings as can in no sense be conceived of as having been made and as making other things. His view is the radically unpoetic view, poetic in the sense of “making.”<sup>50</sup> His accuser was a poet. If one were to deny that the first things are the ideas, one would be forced to say that the first things are the gods, and that the gods made the ideas. (Tenth Book of the *Republic*.) One would be forced to conceive of the first things as making or productive beings. The alternative suggested by the *Euthyphron* is so extreme that one would be very glad if it could be evaded.<sup>51</sup> How can it be avoided? Let us return to the point where Euthyphron unwittingly left the right way.

Euthyphron had divined<sup>52</sup> that doing what the gods do is superior to doing what the gods tell or command us to do. But he became perplexed when he realized that the different gods do different things, opposite things. He was forced to choose among the gods, and therefore he had to appeal to a principle of choice or preference. That principle proved to be the idea of justice, i.e., something which is superior to the gods. But is there no way of choosing among the conflicting gods without having recourse to the ideas, without undermining piety? Indeed there is. From the point of view of ancestral custom, the good is identical with the ancestral, with the old. The best gods will be therefore the oldest gods.<sup>53</sup> In order to find out what the oldest god is,<sup>54</sup> we do not have to refer to any ideas. We simply have to consult the records of the past. If we accept the current stories as such records, we learn that the oldest god is Uranos, the grandfather of Zeus. The only possible way of being pious, in the sense of doing what the gods do, the only way of being safely pious along Euthyphron’s lines, is to do what Uranos did, or to imitate Uranos. But what did Uranos do? He hurt or damaged his children. He damaged the young. In Greek this is the same as<sup>55</sup> he corrupted the young. That is to say, precisely by corrupting the young would Socrates be pious. Or the other way around,<sup>56</sup> the pious Socrates chooses the only pious way, of picking the oldest god as his model, and therefore corrupts the young. Yet Uranos is not only a personal god, he is also heaven. And we know from other Platonic<sup>57</sup> dialogues that virtue can be identified with imitating heaven. Meletus on the other hand, who accuses the aged Socrates, and more particularly Euthyphron, who tries to destroy his own aged father, imitate Zeus, a relatively young god. They are impious. In addition they are inconsistent, for Zeus did not respect the old gods. Hence not Meletus and Euthyphron who respect the old gods, but Socrates who does not respect the old gods, imitates Zeus. Socrates seems to be pious from every point of view, except that of simple orthodoxy.

One may say that these are jokes. These statements are certainly<sup>58</sup> exposed to quite a few difficulties, one of them being that while Uranos may be said to be the oldest god, he certainly is not the oldest divinity. Certainly mother earth is older than Uranos. And Socrates would probably not admit that a man’s virtue

is incompatible with imitating a female god or a female being in general. Was not his own skill a woman's skill? Let us therefore repeat our question, whether we cannot avoid the alternative, either the ideas or the gods. In other words, why is it necessary to assert the primacy of the ideas? The *Euthyphron* suggests an alternative. Either the highest beings are fighting gods, or else the highest beings are ideas. If one denies the primacy of the ideas, one arrives at the belief in fighting gods. Why? Why do the gods fight? Ultimately, because they do not know. But knowledge, genuine knowledge, is the knowledge of the unchangeable, of the necessary, of intelligible necessity, of the ideas. That of which knowledge is knowledge, is prior. The ideas are prior to knowledge of the ideas. There cannot be knowledge if there is no primacy of the ideas. Therefore if one denies the primacy of the ideas, one denies the possibility of knowledge. If the ideas are not the primary beings, the primary beings or the first things cannot be knowing beings. Their action must be blind. They will collide, they will fight. In other words, if the primary beings are the gods, and not the ideas, whatever is good or just will be good or just because the gods love it, and for no other reason, for no intrinsic reason. The primary act is not knowledge or understanding but love without knowledge or understanding, i.e., blind desire. But is this alternative not overcome in monotheism? It is impossible to decide this question on the basis of the *Euthyphron*, in which I believe<sup>59</sup> the singular "god" never occurs. Still the *Euthyphron* seems to suggest that even the oldest god<sup>60</sup> must be conceived of as subject to the ideas. It is true if there is only one god, there is no difficulty in thinking that piety consists in imitating God. One<sup>61</sup> must know that god is good or just or wise, i.e., that God complies with the rules<sup>62</sup> of justice. If that rule were subject to God, or dependent on God, or made by God, if it could be changed by God, it could no longer serve as a standard. God must be thought to be subject to a necessity, an intelligible necessity, which He did not make. If we deny this, if we assume that God is above intelligible necessity, or not bound by intelligible necessity, He cannot know in the strict sense, for knowledge is knowledge of the intelligible and unalterable necessity. In that case, God's actions would be altogether arbitrary. Nothing would be impossible to Him. For example, He could create other gods, and the many gods, who of course cannot have knowledge, would fight.

If piety is superfluous, if the gods are superfluous, why then do almost all men believe that piety is necessary and<sup>63</sup> that the gods are necessary? Why do men need gods? The answer to this question is suggested in the discussion of the third definition of piety. According to that definition, piety consists in tending the gods. More precisely, piety consists in a kind of tending of the gods which is similar to that which slaves practice towards their masters, in prostrating oneself and doing the master's bidding. Piety is a kind of serving. Socrates interprets it as follows. Piety is an art of serving, a serving art, a ministering art. As such, it necessarily serves a ruling or architectonic art. Piety presupposes then that the gods are practitioners of the ruling art. But every art is

productive of something. What then does the gods' ruling art produce—while using human arts as its ministerial arts?<sup>64</sup> Euthyphron merely answers, the gods produce many fine things. He refuses to explain to an uninitiated man like Socrates what these many fine things are. And there can be no doubt that the many fine things which Euthyphron has in mind would not have satisfied Socrates. But Socrates also says in the context that, by answering the question as to what the products of the gods' ruling art are,<sup>65</sup> one would have reached an adequate understanding of piety. The examples which Socrates gives in the immediate context make it clear what he regards as the specific product of the art of the gods. Socrates uses as examples of the ministering art, generalship and farming.<sup>66</sup> The fine things which men try to acquire and produce by generalship and farming are victory and good harvest. Yet generalship and farming are not enough for producing victory and good harvest. For these arts cannot guarantee the outcome, and the outcome is what, in these arts, is the only thing that matters. Whether the outcome of the use of generalship and of farming be good or bad depends upon chance. Chance is that which is in no way controllable by art or knowledge, or predictable by art or knowledge. But too much depends for man on chance to get resigned to the power of chance. Man makes the irrational attempt to control the uncontrollable, to control chance. Yet he knows that he cannot control chance. It is for this reason that he needs the gods. The gods are meant to do for him what he cannot do for himself. The gods are the engine by which man believes he can control chance. He serves the gods in order to be the employer of gods, or the lord of gods. Yet there is one particular art, the most architectonic of all human arts, whose outcome particularly depends on chance, and which<sup>67</sup> absolutely requires gods or piety as its complement. This is the legislative art. The legislative art is concerned with the just, the noble, and the good, i.e., with objects regarding which genuine knowledge is much more difficult than regarding numbers, measures and weights, and which are therefore the natural domain of disagreement. The primary object of the legislative art is the just. And it is as a part of justice that piety is defined in the third and last definition. Piety is justice towards the gods, just as justice in the narrower sense is justice towards men. Justice towards men is good. We have already seen that. What is doubtful is the status of piety, or justice towards the gods. It would seem that the need for piety can best be understood from the deficiency or the limitation of the justice towards men. Now the most serious deficiency of justice towards men is that it does not have sufficient sanction in the eyes of irrational people. It is this sanction that is supplied by piety and by the gods. But in order to fulfill this function, piety must be in the service of justice in the narrower sense. Justice in the narrower sense is primarily law-abidingness, or obedience to the law. Piety therefore must be a part of justice in this sense, that it must be a part of obedience to law. But law is primarily ancestral custom. Therefore piety stands or falls by obedience to ancestral custom. It is here where Socrates agrees with orthodoxy

over against the heretic, Euthyphron. Euthyphron disobeys ancestral custom by accusing his own father of impiety. Socrates shows Euthyphron *ad hominem* that he has no right to disobey ancestral custom. Now no wonder that he appears to Euthyphron as one of the people, as a vulgar man. We may say that both the orthodox and Socrates have common sense, whereas Euthyphron lacks common sense. By this I mean that a society is possible on both orthodox and Socratic principles, whereas society is not possible on Euthyphron's principles. For society is not possible if ancestral custom is not regarded as sacred as far as practice is concerned. It is for this reason that Plato insisted on the necessity of laws punishing impiety. Liberals like ourselves are tempted to argue against Plato on the basis of Plato's own testimony. Does not Plato show us that in the eyes of all men of common sense, of both the many and of Socrates, Euthyphron is a ridiculous being? And is not the ridiculous a harmless deficiency? Why then not tolerate Euthyphron? But I hasten back to the dialogue.

The *Euthyphron* is a very paradoxical dialogue. So indeed is every Platonic dialogue. The specific paradox of the *Euthyphron* consists in this. The normal procedure in a Platonic dialogue in the type to which the *Euthyphron* belongs is that the interlocutor gives first a definition which expresses the most common view on the subject under discussion and then gradually is led to a higher view. But the first definition suggested in the *Euthyphron* is in the decisive respect superior to the last definition, which merely formulates the popular view of piety, meaning piety consists in sacrifice and prayer. More generally expressed, whereas the normal procedure in the Platonic dialogues is ascent from the lower to the higher, the procedure followed in the *Euthyphron* is descent from the higher to the lower. One can explain this paradox in two different ways. In the first place, Euthyphron the heretic must be brought back to where he belongs, namely, to orthodoxy or to conformity. In the second place, the *Euthyphron* is an unusually radical dialogue. It suggests the most uncompromising formulation of the problem of piety. Therefore, the structure of this dialogue has this character: A) exposition of the truth; B) explanation of the basic error. Shortly before the end of the dialogue, Socrates compares Euthyphron to Proteus. Proteus was a wily sea-god who could only with great difficulty be seized. He could turn into all kinds of shapes—bearded lions, dragons, leopards, huge boars, liquid water, branching trees. Euthyphron resembles Proteus because he cannot easily be seized, but changes his position all the time. Moreover, Euthyphron resembles Proteus because Proteus is unerring: he can tell all the secrets of the gods. Now Socrates tries to seize Euthyphron, to force him to tell the truth. Who tried to seize Proteus in the myth, to force him to tell the truth? Menelaus. Just as Euthyphron imitates Proteus, Socrates imitates Menelaus. Socrates resembles Menelaus. What does Socrates have in common with Menelaus? Menelaus is the husband of Helen, just as Socrates is the husband of Xanthippe. This does not lead very far.<sup>68</sup> Let us see in what context, or for what reason, Menelaus tried to seize Proteus. (*Od.* IV / 351ff.) Menelaus himself

says, "At the river of Egypt, eager as I was to hasten hither, the gods still held me back because I did not make the offering due. And the gods wish us ever to be mindful of their precepts." Menelaus tried to seize Proteus because only Proteus could tell him how he could get out of the trouble into which he had come because he did not make the offering due. Socrates tried to seize Euthyphron because only Euthyphron could tell him how he could get out of the trouble into which he had come because he did not make the offerings<sup>69</sup> due. It seems that this state of things throws some light on Socrates' last word to Crito in the *Phaedo*: "We still owe Asclepius a cock,"<sup>70</sup> as one might well understand the passage. However this may be, Socrates failed where Menelaus succeeded. The reason is obvious. Socrates did not ask his Proteus what he, Socrates, should do, but he asked him a purely theoretical question, What is piety?

I said at the beginning that the *Euthyphron* conveys to us an irritating half-truth. That irritating half-truth is that piety is superfluous and that the gods are superfluous except for the many. Why is it a half-truth? Because we know that the gods exist. Not indeed the gods of the city of Athens, but the living gods. How do we know it? By demonstration. By demonstration starting from what phenomena? From the phenomena of motion, of self-motion, life, of<sup>71</sup> the soul. Plato has indicated the half-true character of the message conveyed through the *Euthyphron* by never using that word, the term "soul." Through the emphasis on the ideas, and the silence about the soul, Plato creates the appearance that there is no place for the gods. Plato probably would have justified this half-truth by the consideration that the ideas are at any rate above the soul.

In conclusion, I would like to say a word about what might have been offensive to some of you,<sup>72</sup> the somewhat jocular character of the argument, that is devoted to the most serious of all subjects. I remind you of the end of the *Banquet*, which I take to mean that philosophy fulfills single-handed the highest function of both comedy and tragedy. Both the traditional and current interpretation<sup>73</sup> of Plato may be said to bring out the tragic element in Plato's thought, but they neglect the comic element except where it hits one in the face. Many reasons can be given for this failure. I mention only one. Modern research in Plato originated in Germany, the country without comedy. To indicate why the element of comedy is of crucial importance in Plato, I read to you a few lines from the only Platonist I know of who had an appreciation of this element, Sir Thomas More. I quote: "For to prove that this life is no laughing time, but rather the time of weeping, we find that our Saviour Himself wept twice or thrice, but never find we that He laughed as much as once. I will not swear that He never did, but at the leastwise He left us no ensample of it. But on the other side, He left us ensample of weeping." If we compare what More said about Jesus with what Plato tells us about Socrates, we find that "Socrates laughed twice or thrice, but never find we that he wept as much as once."<sup>74</sup> A slight bias in favor of laughing<sup>75</sup> and against weeping seems to be essential to philosophy. For the beginning of philosophy as the philosophers understood it



is not the fear of the Lord, but wonder. Its spirit is not hope and<sup>76</sup> fear and trembling, but serenity on the basis of resignation. To that serenity, laughing is a little bit more akin than weeping. Whether the Bible is right or philosophy is of course the only question which ultimately matters. But in order to understand that question, one must first<sup>77</sup> see philosophy as it is. One must not see it from the outset through Biblical glasses. Wherever each of us may stand, no respectable purpose is served by trying to prove that we eat the cake and have it. Socrates used all his powers to awaken those who can think, out of the slumber of thoughtlessness. We ill follow his example if we use his authority for putting ourselves to sleep.

(Transcription not checked by author)<sup>78</sup>

## NOTES

The following key is used to identify the sources of the variant readings to be recorded in these notes. For a discussion of the sources themselves, see the editorial preface.

FT: first typescript

ST: second typescript

AST: altered second typescript (ST as revised by handwritten alterations)

eds: editors

1. "common" FT, ST; "most common" AST.
2. "tells us the" FT, ST; "conveys or consists of" AST.
3. "satisfying" FT, ST; "gratifying" AST.
4. "but" FT; absent from ST.
5. "ancestral custom" AST; "ancestral customs" FT, ST.
6. "deeds" FT, ST; "deed" AST.
7. "suspect" FT, ST; "suspected" AST.
8. "careless" FT; "criminal" ST.
9. "ignorant" ST; "ignorance" FT.
10. "profusely" AST; "profusedly" FT, ST.
11. "himself" AST; "itself" FT, ST.
12. "We have" FT, ST; "He had" AST.
13. "missionary" AST; "visionary" FT, ST.
14. "he has" FT, ST; "we have" AST.
15. "these" FT, ST; "such" AST.
16. "just" ST; "unjust" FT, with handwritten brackets around "un."
17. "not so good poets" ST; "not the good poets" FT.
18. "profusely say" eds; "profusedly say" FT, ST, but "professedly" written in a hand other than Professor Strauss's above the line in FT; "openly declare" AST.
19. "theology" FT, ST; "'theology'" AST.
20. "He belongs firstly" FT, ST; "He belongs as little to it as" AST.
21. "to say the least" FT, ST; crossed out in AST.
22. At this point there is a paragraph break in both FT and ST. A marginal note in ST in Professor Strauss's own hand reads "no para."
23. "prudently. For every" FT, ST; "prudently: every" AST.

## 22 · Interpretation

24. "I personally believe that" FT, ST; "Perhaps" AST.
25. "just and pious together with prudence" eds; "just and pious together with prudent" FT, ST; "just and pious, and also prudent" AST.
26. "setting" AST; "second" FT, ST.
27. "Meletus'" ST; "Socrates'" FT.
28. In AST there is a marginal note beside this sentence in Professor Strauss's hand which reads "cf. Diodotus in Thucydides."
29. "he" ST; absent from FT.
30. "This is all." FT, ST; "This is the sum of the change that occurs in the dialogue." AST.
31. "similarity" ST; "singularity" but crossed out in FT; "similarity?" typed above the line in FT.
32. "—by a shortcut to knowledge of the divine things" added at the end of the sentence in AST.
33. "not believing in the gods in which the city believes" AST; "not believing the gods which the city believes" FT, ST.
34. "knows" FT, ST; "notes" AST.
35. "taste" FT, ST; "'case'" AST.
36. "animating" FT, ST; "informing" AST.
37. "view" ST; absent from FT.
38. "prevented" FT, ST; "forestalls" AST.
39. "means," AST; "means that," FT, ST.
40. "said" FT, ST; "thought" AST.
41. "denial" FT, ST; "rejection" AST.
42. "Or, to use a more up-to-date term, it is deviationist." FT, ST; crossed out in AST.
43. "considerations" FT, ST; "consideration" AST.
44. FT but not ST leaves an additional space between this paragraph and the next.
45. "observation" FT, ST; "aspiration" AST.
46. "one must leave it at simply denying" eds; "one must leave it as simply denying" FT; "one must leave it (at) as simply denying" ST; "one must be willing simply to deny" AST.
47. "By pleasing one god one will displease the other." FT, ST; "What pleases one god will displease another." AST.
48. "why one must imitate" FT, ST; "to imitate" AST.
49. "One can also say that" FT, ST; "To go a step further," AST.
50. "poetic in the sense of 'making'" FT, ST; crossed out in AST.
51. "evaded" FT, ST; "avoided" AST.
52. "divined" AST; "denied" FT, ST.
53. "The best gods will be therefore the oldest gods." FT, ST; "The best god will therefore be the oldest god." AST
54. "In order to find out what the oldest god is" FT, ST; "In order to discover which was the oldest god" AST.
55. "In Greek this is the same as" ST (crossed out in AST); "In Greek, the saying is" FT.
56. "Or the other way around," FT, ST; "Or, alternatively," AST.
57. "Platonic" ST; "personal" FT.
58. "One may say that these are jokes. These statements are certainly" FT, ST, "One may say that these remarks are tinged with levity. They take a stand which certainly is" AST.
59. "I believe" FT, ST; "if I remember correctly" AST.
60. "oldest god" FT, ST; "only God" AST.
61. "God. One" eds; "god, One" FT; "god. one" ST; "God. But before one can imitate God, one" AST. The editors have followed AST in capitalizing "God" throughout the remainder of this paragraph.
62. "rules" FT, ST; "rule" AST.
63. "and" FT, ST; "or" AST.
64. "using human arts as its ministerial arts" FT, ST; "using a human art as a ministerial art" AST.

65. "the products of the gods' ruling art are" AST; "the product of the gods' ruling arts are" FT, ST.

66. In AST there is a marginal note beside this sentence in Professor Strauss's hand which refers to Xenophon's *Memorabilia* I.1.

67. "therefore" added at this point in AST.

68. "it seems" added at the end of the sentence in AST.

69. "offerings" FT; "offering" ST.

70. "we forgot to make the offering due," added at this point in AST.

71. "of" FT, ST; crossed out in AST.

72. "what might have been offensive to some of you," FT, ST; crossed out in AST.

73. "current interpretation" FT, ST; "the current interpretations" AST.

74. This is the end of a passage which has been crossed out in AST. The passage began above with the sentence, "I mention only one."

75. "A slight bias in favor of laughing" FT, ST; "Yet a slight bias in favor of comedy and against tragedy, in favor of laughing" AST. (See note 74.)

76. "and" FT, ST; "in" AST.

77. "first" FT, ST; crossed out in AST.

78. "(Transcription not checked by author)" FT, ST; crossed out in AST. (See the editorial preface.)